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Testimony of Rebecca Harris, Connecticut Resident and Law Student Intern in New Haven Legal Assistance Assoc. Reentry Clinic, in Support of H.B. 5208, An Act Concerning Housing Opportunities for Justice-Impacted Persons

Housing Committee Hearing, March 1, 2022

Representative Williams, Senator Lopes, and esteemed members of the Housing Committee:

I am writing to express support for H.B. 5208, a bill to limit housing providers' consideration of prospective tenants' criminal records. I am testifying as a law student intern working in New Haven Legal Assistance Association's Reentry Clinic, which aims to assist individuals with criminal records in addressing the collateral consequences of their convictions. These collateral consequences often include barriers to accessing housing and employment. I work with the Reentry Clinic because I feel strongly that individuals with criminal records should have the opportunity to reconnect with their communities and move forward with their lives.

Under current law, which allows housing providers to establish "blanket bans" barring all prospective tenants with criminal records, it can be very difficult for our clients to secure safe and stable housing. I recently began working with an individual impacted by this issue. He reached out to our office because he was issued a Section 8 housing voucher but even with Section 8 assistance, he has been unable to secure an apartment due to his criminal record. By offering him a voucher, the New Haven Housing Authority has essentially declared that he needs and deserves housing assistance. Yet he is still homeless. Connecticut is currently a leader in homelessness prevention,¹ and the General Assembly should safeguard this reputation by supporting individuals with criminal records in their search for safe, affordable housing.

H.B. 5208 is a carefully crafted measure to support individuals like my client. Rather than barring all clients with criminal records, housing providers would have to conduct individualized assessments and determine whether an applicant's record contains anything relevant to his or her ability to be a safe, respectful tenant. The bill also provides a limited lookback period for criminal records: housing providers would not be allowed to consider misdemeanor convictions from over three years ago or felony convictions from over seven years ago. Lastly, the bill would bar housing providers from denying tenants on the basis of past arrests that did not lead to convictions. These policies give individuals with criminal records a fair shot at finding housing while taking the interests of housing providers into account.

This bill also promotes racial justice. People of Color in Connecticut are both arrested and incarcerated at disproportionate rates.² 11% of Connecticut residents identify as Black, yet Black people constitute 41% percent of the state's incarcerated population.³ When housing providers categorically deny all individuals with criminal records, their policies inevitably have a disparate racial impact. H.B. 5208 directly targets this source of racial inequity in housing.

¹ <https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-homelessness-in-connecticut-0113-20170112-story.html>

² <https://www.cga.ct.gov/PS98/rpt%5Colr%5Chtm/98-R-1325.htm>

³ <https://www.vera.org/downloads/pdfdownloads/state-incarceration-trends-connecticut.pdf>

Finally, this bill may even have cost-saving benefits for our state. According to the Commissioner of the Department of Housing, it costs the state of Connecticut \$33,000 to provide services to an individual who remains homeless for one year.⁴ By giving individuals with criminal records a greater opportunity to secure housing on their own, H.B. 5208 could reduce the need for temporary shelter and housing counseling services.

The current policy framework is both costly and harmful to Connecticut residents. By contrast, H.B. 5208 would create a fair system under which the needs of both housing providers and tenants would be met. I therefore urge the Housing Committee to give H.B. 5208 a favorable report.

Thank you for your time and consideration of my testimony regarding H.B. 5208. Please feel free to reach out to me at rharris@nhlegal.org if you have any questions or would like to discuss this issue in more depth.

⁴ <https://www.courant.com/news/connecticut/hc-homelessness-in-connecticut-0113-20170112-story.html>